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Simple Pleasures of Southern Sarawak

Located at a Global Positioning System coordinate of 1.8°N 109.7667°E and 120 km away from Kuching, Sematan is a tourist's gem situated at Sarawak's very end; quaint yet relaxing in its own right. Though well-known among domestic tourists, this little town has yet to be popularized globally as a tourist hotspot.

If my pen pal, Sara, were to visit me, I would first take her to enjoy the scenery of the blue tributary of Sematan, flanked by sandy coasts. Slightly to our right, the South China Sea glimmers and resembles a sky full of stars on the sea's surface, mesmerizing tired travelers who wish to seek comfort after a day of hitting the road. The sea breeze is cool and enticing as a recompense for the tropical heat that visitors might have problems getting adjusted to. To top it all off, we will wash the picturesque scene down with a chilling cup of coconut water as we enjoy the sight of Pulau Talang-talang Besar and Pulau Talang-talang Kecil. They resemble two little hills afloat on the azure seas. However, the highlight of the town would be the inaugural Malaysia Day celebration held in Sematan and the heralded arrival of Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak. Besides exposing Sara to one of Malaysia's important leaders, a flea market with multiple-merchandise stalls is compulsory during such prodigious events so we'll have a great time scouring for half-priced items and participating in fun activities like the blowpipe contest.

During the term break, we would have a blast splashing in the sapphire seas of Palm Beach, a coastal area about 2 km from Sematan town often visited by tourists from abroad. This place is jam-packed during public holidays and crowded during weekends. Most of the visitors here are Kuching-ites who drop by Sematan to let their hair down and leave all their worries behind (or simply let them dissipate into the serenity of countryside life). Locals, however, opt for weekdays to visit the beach. Besides the lovely coast, Palm Beach also offers a variety of amenities, namely two swimming pools, a rock-climbing wall, tandem bikes, surfing, wakeboarding, and snorkeling. We would then take a free-and-easy promenade along the soft, sandy beach while enjoying vanilla ice-cream purchased at Palm Beach Cafe, before heading back to Sematan town. We would ride leisurely, taking in the reminiscing sight of old shop-houses that coexist with the new ones. We'll buy a few banana fritters, their batter golden-brown, crackling as we sink our teeth into the delectable snacks. For dinner, we'll enjoy fresh pumpkin leaves, coconut pith soup, and fried oil palm pith served with anchovies. What a delight that'll be!

The second day will be even more exciting. My family, Sara, and I would head for Jangkar Falls, a 27-tier majestic waterfall situated at Kampung Biawak (roughly 30 minutes drive from Sematan) that keeps tourists coming. The scenery from the pool on tier 2 is picturesque, but tourists who have made it to the top tier claim that the view there is the apogee

of scenery. With the help of a local guide, we'll embark on a two-hour hike, stopping at intervals to drink in the lush greenery and the song and cry of the unsullied Borneo forests. At the same time, the cool, invigorating air will gently blow in comfort to hikers eager to take a dip in the ice-like, cool waters of the Falls. Stopping at the guide's hut, we'll roast chicken wings and drumsticks, and clams, and we'll cook pork 'pansuh' (a traditional Dayak stew cooked in bamboo) to enjoy at the falls. After two hours of toil, we'll finally arrive at the majestic falls awaiting us to bathe in its cool, refreshing, 3-metre-deep pool; an enchanting aquamarine shade. Not wanting to miss an opportunity to cool down, everyone will definitely have a whale of a time splashing about in the irresistible waters, alongside the rumbling waterfall that pours into the large pool beneath, which never fails to impress audacious visitors. Lunch would be the Dayak stew we cooked before and dessert would be cut queenies which are picked from my family's backyard.

On the third day, Sara and the whole family would conquer the peaks of Gunung Pueh, a mountain approximately 200m tall that hosts the rare Rafflesia, a gigantic, pungent flower that attracts flies as its pollination agent. The flower, which takes the form of an agaric, is a rare sight in itself. However, with any luck, we could catch the sight of this exotic flower blooming, surrounded by flies attracted to the noxious smell it emits. It takes about two days to reach the top so we'll set up camp there and continue our hike the next day.

After climbing the mountain by foot, we'll enjoy ABC (short for 'air batu campur'), which is a Malaysian top dessert of shaved ice, drizzled with evaporated milk, and sprinkled with kidney beans, sweet corn, grass jelly, fruit, green worm-like jelly, and pink sago on the first floor of Lundu Bus Station priced at RM 3.50. At hotels, you can find rose syrup and 'gula melaka' (palm sugar) served separately as drizzles for ABC. Of course, the ingredients you can find in ABC differ according to vendors, but to sum it up, this dessert is the best of hot weather desserts.

A visit to Sarawak would be incomplete without dropping by Kuching, declared as the 'City of Unity'. First stopping at Bako National Park, the entire family would board a speedboat for about 40 minutes across the Bako River and begin our hike through the woods. Housing a colourful array of fauna, about 275 proboscis monkeys and over 150 bird species, the two-hour hike at Telok Assam would certainly pay off as we can see the coastline from afar and spot proboscis monkeys amongst the mangrove trees. Finally, the sight of bearded boars wallowing in mud or scavenging for food is a rare sight, even in Bornean forests, so that would be a great way to celebrate the end of our walk. On this topic, macaques, leaf-monkeys, mouse-deers, flying lizards, the iconic green crested lizard, and the 2-meter long water monitor are among the wildlife that inhabit this national park and entice tourists to drop by. Annelid worms, anemones, crabs, and small shrimps in rock pools appear when the tide is out, while oriental small-clawed otters can be spotted swimming in the Batang Assam river or running across the muddy mangroves searching for food. Hairy-nosed otters are occasionally seen feeding in the morning so we would have to keep close watch on them.

On the fifth day, we would take a water taxi across the great milky Batang Sarawak to Kampung Boyak, located just opposite the Riverside Hotel and famous for its 'kek lapis'. The water taxis awaiting passengers at the water-front, often dubbed 'east gondolas', range from

RM1 to RM2 per head for a round trip. Kek Lapis Dayang Salhah and Mira Cake House are the most well-known venues, which offer a wide choice of 'kek lapis' and irresistible free samples to tempted customers. These colorful and delectable delicacies cost anywhere from RM10 to RM350. Amongst the cakes displayed, visitors might be intrigued by the name of the coffee-black cake with a heavy, sweet raisin-like flavor -'Hati Pari'. The word translates to “stingray liver” because this monotonous-coloured cake resembles a stingray's liver. This is in striking contrast to the typical brightly-coloured ‘kek lapis,’ yet the strong and sweet flavor is the reason it is put on a customers’ shopping lists. The UK cake is another popular favorite: its cross-section resembles a Great Britain flag topped with raspberry jelly for the red stripes and blueberry jelly for the blue ones.

Next, we'll head to Carpenter Street for a real Sarawakian lunch of Laksa (Sarawakian curry mee) and Mi Dawai (wiry fried flour noodles, only found in Sarawak) before washing the meal down with a glass of iced Teh C special (three-layered tea comprising alfalfa juice, evaporated milk and tea). As a final cap, our last two destinations would be Fairy Cave and Tasik Biru (Blue Lake) in Bau. As we explore the caves, swallows and bats stir up amongst the crystalline stalactites and stalagmites. Our adventure ends after thirty minutes, yet another attraction awaits. The placid, tranquil azure lake is a serene beauty to behold, despite the staggering arsenic levels in the water which deters tourists from bathing in or fishing at the lake.

A vacation in southern Sarawak is a must for every globetrotter. I am certainly eager to await my pen-pal's arrival and share the simple pleasures of southern Sarawak to the world.